# TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM AND THE QUEST FOR EQUITY IN MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOMS.
# CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

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**Abstract:** *In a rapidly changing and culturally diverse world, teacher quality may play a key role in addressing different instructional needs and promoting equality of opportunity for all for a democratic society. Beyond the idea of "Best Practices", this paper aims to examine the complex process of learning and implementing a cooperative strategy for promoting inclusion in multicultural classrooms. By discussing data collected during an ethnographic research project in some Italian Primary schools, the paper sheds light upon some of the challenges teachers encountered in putting the new strategy into practice in their own classrooms. Findings reveal how teacher previous educational ideas and ways of teaching, as well as the local teaching context, affected their choices and the meanings they gave to innovation. Instead of applying the new strategy as a "ready-to-use package", these teachers recognized themselves as active agents in this process of change.*

**Keywords:** *teacher professionalism; ethnography of education; cooperative learning; multicultural classrooms; equity;*

## 1. Teacher professionalism in the age of globalization and diversity

Within the frame of European wide demographic change and socio-cultural differentiation phenomena, cultural and linguistic diversity emerges as one of the main challenges school may address. Students' success depends upon the schools' capacity to deal with their different instructional needs and respond to such change effectively. Teacher quality is one of the most significant factors in students' achievement and educational improvement, and thus teacher professionalism is at core of the international debate over the last decades. This concept is defined as "improving quality and standards of practice" (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 152), but its meaning is much disputed. Evetts (2013) discusses the relation among profession, professionalization and professionalism, where the latter is presented as a discourse that combines the occupational value and the ideological interpretations, but it is also defined as a value system. In fact, it is not just a matter of standardization of qualification for practice. It may relate to teachers' epistemological beliefs and values, which in turn are particularly relevant for inclusion in our complex and multicultural societies (see Townsend & Bates, 2007). International Agenda (European Commission, 2013, 2018; UN, 2015) highlights the need to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education (Goal 4), in order to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all and nurture more responsible citizens for a democratic society. Teachers are required to be equipped and qualified for this new and developing challenge. Thus, a greater attention is posed to teacher preparation, both as initial education and continuous professional development, to acquire inclusion competences and educational approaches about students' differentiation.

Cooperative Learning is internationally recognized as one of successful approaches to deal with diverse classrooms. It creates the conditions for a more equal dialogue in class, by

leading students of different social, ethnic and cultural backgrounds participate in a supportive manner (Sharan, 2013). Learning from others and with others, balancing interpersonal respect and cooperation, recognizing diversity as a resource are some of the main principles which are developed through cooperative groups. For its potential for intercultural education and social justice, Cooperative Learning has been considered "Best Practice", which deserves to be part of educational policy in some countries and advocated by manyteacher training institutions (universities, educational centres or associations) to improve teaching quality in heterogeneous classrooms (Council of Europe, 2008; Gobbo, Jacobs &Pescarmona, 2010; Grant & Portera, 2011). In Italy, the educational guidelines have receipted the challenges of promoting intercultural education and more inclusive learning strategies at school, and explicitly refer to Cooperative Learning as a means of dealing with pluralism in the class (MPI, 2007; Miur, 2012). However, despite there is an increasing interest at the political level and academic discourses, some research shows that there is a persistence of traditional teaching approaches in Italy and little attention to students' differences and to the promotion of class discussions and group work tasks (Ferrer-Esteban, 2016; Miur, 2018). While educational guidelines emphasises teachers' preparation to strive for inclusion and teachers' capabilities have featured strongly in arguments for reforms in teacher education, only a modest evidence is provided regarding the process that connect teacher training and the effective implementation in class.

Therefore, one of the questions that arises in my research is how may professionalism of teachers be enhanced locally when implementing "Best Practice" for inclusion, such as Cooperative Learning, and to which extent can this practice innovate the way of teaching.

## 2. A Cooperative Learning strategy for democracy classrooms

Among the various cooperative strategies, the proposal of Elizabeth Cohen, which is called Complex Instruction (CI), distinguishes itself by its explicit aim to improve equal status interaction between students of differing academic and social levels in group work (Batelaan, 1998; Cohen, 1994; Cohen & Lotan 1997; Gobbo, 2010; Pescarmona, 2012). While other cooperative methods seem to focus on the way of working together successfully, Cohen starts from the analysis of the factors which may impede students' participation in a group task and produce inequality. Based on a sociological analysis of classroom interaction and Expectation States Theory (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), Cohen recognized that inequality in class has to be addressed, not only to the social inequities of the larger society, but mainly in the structure of work tasks and patterns of interactions in classrooms. Indeed, the ways in which teachers design learning tasks, organize the communication among students and between teachers and students, and evaluate the outcome influence the participation in learning activities and, thus, students' academic success. In order to change the conditions that influence students' participation in the educational process, CI offers three main strategies, such as: (1) teacher delegation of authority and accountability; (2) adaptation of the curriculum towards inter-disciplinary and open-ended tasks, which require an interdependence of multiple abilities (See Gardner, 1983) to be solved; (3) status treatment and feedback procedures that enable teachers to change the perceptions of students' ability to learn (especially the low-status ones'). The final purpose is to make the class context more equal by recognizing each student's different contribution as a resource to the task, and creating a positive mix set of expectations of competence for each student.

## 3. Research Context and Methodology

Grounded in Cohen's theory, this study will analyse the process of embedding this "Best Practice" into teaching in Italy and what meanings teachers give to this process of innovation. It presents a further reflection on some findings from an ethnographic research

project, which was developed at the University of Turin, in Italy (Pescarmona, 2017, 2018). This took place at the end of a teacher-training course on CI and involved a group of primary school teachers who decided to create new CI teaching units and implement these in their multicultural classes. Four schools located in different areas of Bologna and its Province were selected: one school was in the city centre, one in the mountains and the other two within the near countryside. All of these schools were attended by students with different immigrant and socio-cultural backgrounds. The research was set up as a *case study*(Pole & Morrison, 2003; Jewett & Schultz, 2011) and was carried out in two second classes (pupils of 7 years-old), a fifth and a fourth year class (pupils of 9-10 years-old). A qualitative research methodology is adopted. Data was collected by using participant observation in teachers' meetings, while they were working together on creating new CI units, and then in their classrooms during everyday lessons and afterwards during CI experiments. The main fieldwork took almost two years, at least twice a month, by adopting a "recurrent time mode" (Jeffrey & Troman, 2006). To reach a holistic comprehension of the context and gain a "thick" description (Geertz, 1987) of educational reality, field notes were triangulated with open interviews and informal conversations with the six teachers involved. Data were qualitatively analysed according to *Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which allows constructing interpretative categories from raw data (Wolcott, 1994; Pole & Morrison, 2003). Data were read and re-read in order to look for recurrent themes, by identifying singularities, regularities, and variations. This process allowed to organizing data into manageable units, making connections among them, and then developing patterns to interpret the world of educational actors. Although ethnographic data usually can not be generalized, it has the advantage of getting a sensitive and deep understanding of teachers' professional beliefs, values and strategies and voicing the insiders' point of view in relation to their contexts (see Troman, Jeffrey, &Walford, 2004).

## 4. Dilemma and strategies in implementing a new teaching strategy

Findings revealed that learning and experimenting with CI was more complex and uneven than what may have been initiallyexpected. During teachers' meetings, these teachers were highly motivated to make students understand that there are different ways to learn, and often stated they believed in Cohen's sociological theory. They showed a progressive self-involvement, but the implementation of the new strategy did not proceed constantly. Dealing with CI required of teachers a huge creative effort and led them to compare the new ideas with their previous educational values and beliefs. Rather than simply transferring the new ideas and cooperative rules into practice, they discussed critical educational issues, such as how pupils learn, what and how to assess the work, how to teach. This generated *educational dilemma* (Pescarmona, 2015, 2017), which was not easy to solve. The main dilemma concerned: the creation of multiple abilities tasks and the consequent evaluation of students according to a broader notion of intelligences; and the issue regarding the delegation of authority and the recognition of pupils' power of acting autonomously. For example, teachers recognized the power of designing multiple ability group work for inclusion, but also complained about the pressure caused by having to follow a vast syllabus. And, in general, they argued the priority of developing linguistic skills at school. Thus, they often reported, "*I'm worried about dropping behind*". They believed that their role was to promote the ability of each pupil to participate and give a specific contribution to the task. But they reported they had to act as mediators of learning activities. As a teacher said "*I'm afraid pupils may fail... some pupils need extra-help*". Experimenting with CI challenged the perspective they were accustomed to, but at the same time it could stimulate a pedagogical discussion and sparked a new kind of awareness. As a teacher realized, "*Sticking to the same teaching method is a strong temptation* […] *We often believe to be equal and unbiased,*

*despite our class context and students' diversity*". They started to recognize the importance that their expectations had in class interactions and, thus, started to consider pupils' different answers.

Even if these teachers appreciated the aim of giving equal opportunity to all students, they questioned CI effective implementation at school. They frequently argued the constrictions they experienced in experimenting CI in classroom, such as the difficult relationships with colleagues and the limits caused by a fast turnover, when they wanted to develop an interdisciplinary task during the year. They also complained about the rigid school time-table and the increasing requirements for fulfilling bureaucratic aspects. And, in general, they perceived the lack of educational policy and financial resources for supporting a real innovation at school. As a teacher said "*it's not just a question of method*". Sometimes, they felt they had little choice and they could decide to fall back on their usual way of teaching. But, at the same time, the teachers recognized CI as a tool to reaffirm their educational values and tried to find new strategies to tackle dilemma and the usual school constraints creatively. Thus, they interpreted the syllabus and the evaluation criteria in a more interdisciplinary way, re- organized the school timetable in order to devote more time to working in groups or enrich the task activities with engaging resources. By balancing different requirements and ideas, they became more aware of the complexity and richness of the process of teaching, and felt they had the power of working in a different and unexpected way because, as a teacher said, *"I don't want restrict students' chances"*. Therefore, they started to analyse each lesson in terms of access to learning.

**5. New professionalism from a teachers' perspective**

All these teachers succeeded in implementing CI in class, but they gave different meanings to this experience. According to the degree of difficulty or openings these teachers encountered in introducing CI "Best Practice" into their usual way of working at school, their reactions to innovation could be different. They interpreted CI strategy from different perspectives, according to the perception of having the power to overcome dilemmas and constrictions. Consequently, they followed different patterns of response by moving among different positions, which I summarized in four categories. The educational innovation could be a *challenge*. It could be seen as a confirmation of teachers' beliefs and a strengthening of their professional identity. As a teacher declared, "*CI is a professional adventure*", and got this opportunity for sharing new ideas with colleagues and involving them in a CI training course to start a process of change in her school. CI experience could also act as a *professional springboard*, an improvement in teacher own professional career, in terms of competence and values. "*I think I'll take a new path, but it's a long way to go*", a teacher affirmed. CI could be a plunge to innovation for the individual teacher, nevertheless the constraints and poor conditions that hampered an effective dissemination in school practice. Moreover, this process of innovation could be experienced as an *adjustment*. It could be seen as an activity that implied a compromise between teachers' ideals and usual school requirements. It would be a negotiated practice. As a teacher said, "*CI is a luxury amongst other activities. But it's just one of many*". At school, this might be a common position towards "Best Practice", which could be interpreted as "*good initiatives*", but limited to a period of time, and sometimes without the power to modify the class setting. Finally, in another case, experimenting with CI acted as a *professional breakdown and self-reconstruction*. It was a real break from tradition and an opportunity for a deeper professional change. One of these teachers realized how the everyday way of teaching constructed certain "*school habits*", which could activate in pupils a resistant attitude towards change and affected the adoption of a new strategy. Thus, she used CI as a new lens to critically look at her usual educational practice and at the end stated, "*... CI has changed my professional life*".

Hence, teachers filtered CI Best Practice and adapted it in the new contexts. This is important to say because in classroom we should expect changes to take place, but this should be not taken-for-granted.

## 6. Conclusion

Research findings do not give an evaluation of a CI strict implementation, but rather a qualitative interpretation of the process, which sheds light on the uneven but rich way of dealing with the new educational strategy. What emerges from data is that borrowing CI Best Practice was experienced by these teachers as a process of appropriation. Innovating their way of teaching was for these teachers an open process. They did not just apply the new strategy as a "ready-to-use-package". These teachers acted according to their own educational ideas and to their local school context, which did not play a neutral role. During the process, teachers were not just "passive recipients" of the new practice, but they were active subjects of change. While they were considering alternative ways of giving voice and power of participation to students, they appropriated themselves of the same voice and power. In this terms, this process enhanced teacher professionalism, by raising their ability to rise critical questions about their own usual practice and reflecting on their role in class. These teachers realized that their professional identity was not necessarily pigeonholed in a predefined "script". Thus, they started to develop multiple expectations for themselves as teachers and became more aware of differential teacher effectiveness[15], which made it possible to create the condition for inclusion and equity in multicultural classes.

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[15] Definition according to Campbell, Kyriakides, Muijs, & Robinson (2003).

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